

- Special Report -

7 TIPS TO BETTER COMMUNICATION AT WORK

How to talk your way out of trouble at work and home, reduce stress, avoid unwarranted conflict and create better relationships with your co-workers

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Introduction

The demands on individuals by organisations nowadays are enormous. People are pushed for more and more. The more they do, the more is asked. If previous output or standards go down, the first comment is often, 'You did it before. Why can't you do it now?'

It is not uncommon in the workplace to find conflicts over goals as people adjust to changing situations that call for new perspectives.

Not surprisingly, this causes stress and conflict. People are accustomed to working from their own perspectives and can find it really difficult when the boundaries are changed, the goal posts are moved and they are expected to deal with new challenges and expectations with no training in where to begin or how to start.

Even worse, they may feel that their ability to negotiate new situations is limited. As their existing skills and experience appear to be no longer relevant, they can feel discounted and depreciated and on the back foot in dealing with change. Their perception of their self worth plummets and this can lead to a downward spiral that lowers morale and reduces productivity.

Some of these issues can be addressed, at least in part, if people are given information that enables them to understand better what is happening, skills to use and encouragement to use

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them, and support from systems that recognize the need to treat people with respect and appreciation for their strengths and contribution.

There is nothing particularly new or original in these seven tips. However, everyone has their own unique style and sometimes we just need to be reminded to use what we already know.

Conflict at work can be a source of stress leading to greater absenteeism, higher turnover of staff, lower production and poor morale. I believe that when people realize they have choices in how they respond in difficult situations and become more confident in applying some simple skills, disagreement can be a valuable impetus to innovation, progress and greater satisfaction at work.

We are all part of the greater whole. Whatever we do impacts on others like the ripples of a wave. My intention in writing this short report is to create another ripple that will encourage us all to view disagreement as a positive contribution to progress, avoid unwarranted conflict and find the interests that unite us as part of our common humanity.

Tip #1: *Focus on common interests*

We've all known people who cannot get along. What starts as a misunderstanding develops into a full blown war of words and worse where the main motives of the people involved seem to be retaliation and hurt to the other.

This is bad enough for the people concerned. But it also affects all the people around.

Paradoxically, sometimes the people at the heart of the conflict almost seem to be enjoying it in a weird sort of a way while other people's lives are made miserable.

What to do?

A first step is to turn the focus away from the immediate conflict to common interests. In an experiment to see what might help people of different views to get along, people with known strong opposite views on an issue were invited to meet together to talk about it. When they were first introduced, they were not allowed to declare which side of the issue they were on: they had to keep the conversation to other matters relating to hobbies and pastimes. What happened was that these people began to bond with each other when they discovered that many of them shared the same likes and dislikes. When the time came to talk about the 'hot' issue, they were able to talk to each other in a much more respectful way because they had found things in common that created a bond.

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When people begin to recognize some of the likes and dislikes and experiences they have in common, it becomes easier for them to treat each other with respect.

When disagreement escalates to conflict in a work situation, common goals that benefit all parties tend to be overlooked or forgotten. The secret to the first tip is to shift the conversation to common interests shared by the 'combatants' and those around them. Focus on common interests!

Tip #2: Choose manageable goals

I remember hearing a story about a boy who wanted to be a head of police when he grew up. When he discovered that he couldn't be the head of police immediately, he gave up the idea of entering the police force altogether.

This child had unrealistic expectations. He didn't recognize he would need to take a series of intermediate steps from where he was to where he wanted to be.

The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

Sometimes, to resolve a disagreement, we need to take quite a number of in-between steps. But where is the best starting point?

You've probably heard the story of the traveller who asked for direction to his next destination. The answer he received was that it would be easier to get there if he started from somewhere else! Often we feel the same. It would be easier to resolve a situation if we were dealing with a different set of givens.

A good question to ask is, If this situation were somehow miraculously resolved overnight and you didn't know it, what would be the first thing you would notice that would tell you that things had changed for the better?

Maybe it would be something very simple, like the other person saying, Good Morning.

Saying good morning could be that first step in the journey of a thousand miles.

Make a start on conflict resolution with a small manageable step.

Choose manageable goals.

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Tip #3: *Get everyone on side*

William Ury who wrote the ground breaking *Getting to Yes*, wrote another book, *The Third Side*. In it he talks about how people in the community can influence the outcome of a conflict. The book opens with a dramatic story of a potentially disastrous traffic incident in South Africa. The two people involved are on the verge of blows. Off to the side an older man is quietly moving his hand up and down in the direction of the irate motorist. Suddenly the motorist jumps into his car and drives off. A potentially nasty incident has been averted through the silent intervention of a third party.

As we know, disagreement and conflict affects not just those immediately involved. All those in the vicinity, the bystanders, are also affected. And the bystanders can choose to make some positive intervention.

What might this be?

- It could be, as in the above example, to signal a more useful course of action to one of the people involved.
- Or it could be to make both parties aware of how their conflict is affecting those around them.
- Or it could be to bring the parties together to talk it over.
- Or to remind everyone of the common interests that are at stake and start to refocus on what is for everyone's benefit.

There are many options available to those affected by other people's disagreement and conflict. Many times we do nothing because we think we have to resolve everything. We are like the boy who couldn't be head of police so didn't join the force. There may well be a small step that someone on the outside can take. Every small step counts. Every small step makes a difference.

If a conflict is affecting the whole community whether it be the work or home community, is there a small step that you can take to move it closer to resolution. If there were such a step, what would it be?

Get everyone on side.

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Tip #4: *Appreciate the strengths in the other person*

We all know people who 'ruffle our feathers', press our hot buttons and give us a hard time.

Why does this happen?

A number of factors can be in play.

1. We all have relationships and incidents in our past that have hurt us in some way. The person who presses our hot buttons can be triggering a memory, conscious or unconscious of such an incident. This brings up the unpleasant emotion associated with the past incident and tends to cloud our assessment of the present situation and the person. We interpret what is happening in the light of what has happened to us before and this may be very wide of the mark.

People do similar things for very different reasons. You may see a movie because you like the leading actor, your friend may see the same movie because they like the sound of the plot and another person may go because she wants to be able to say that she's seen the movie.

2. This brings us to another possible factor in these difficult situations. Research has shown (what most people knew intuitively all along) that we are all a mix of motivations and that each person has a unique motivational value style. We are most comfortable around people who share similar motivational value styles and least comfortable with people who are most differently motivated from us. These differences in motivational value style also contribute to the stress we can experience in getting along with some people.

Understanding some of these differences in motivational style helps some people to deal better with this stress. Here's a brief overview you may like to reflect on.

- Very generally speaking, some people are more motivated by the opportunity to solve problems; they like to analyse what is going on and can be very useful in generating 'what if' scenarios for a team that is starting a new project.
- Other people prefer to focus on getting the job done; they like to perform and be seen to be pro-active. These people can contribute enormously to getting a project underway and establishing the milestones for success.
- And there is a third group of people – the 'people people' who just love to interact with others and listen to their stories.

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We are all a mixture, of course, but it's easy to see that if you are strongly attracted to the 'Just do it' approach, you could find it hard to get along with a person who wants to spend more time talking things over. However, each approach has its own strength and all approaches can play a valuable part in the success of a project. When you think about it, each of these motivational values is a part of the bigger picture: we need the action-oriented people, the problem solvers and the people people. They are all part of the solution.

When you find your hot buttons are being pressed, you can do two things.

- You can recognize that maybe there is something from an earlier stage in your life that is still hurting and has been triggered by the other person's behaviour. If it is a very deep hurt then you may like to consider counselling to address it.
- You can recognize that the other person is coming from a different motivational value than yourself and recognize the benefit in this. If you are strong on connecting with others, a person on your team who can step back and analyse, or a person who is focused on jumping in and completing the project are both potentially strong additions and vice versa. Sometimes, of course, their contribution may feel more like adverse criticism than constructive help. And sometimes this is indeed the case. However, if you can look at the big picture and the strength and value behind what has upset you, you are a step nearer to finding the next small step to a resolution that keeps everyone on side and benefits the whole team or community in the long run.

Appreciate the strengths of the other person.

Tip #5: *Find objective measures of progress*

We've covered focusing on common interests, choosing manageable goals, getting everyone on side, and appreciating the good in the other person.

You may be thinking that this is all well and good but a tad airy-fairy. The next tip is very down to earth. You need to find agreed objective measures of your progress towards resolution of disagreement and conflict. This is one of the four principles set out by Ury and Fisher in *Getting to Yes*, the classic text on principled negotiation and conflict resolution. The other three principles are:

- Separate the people from the problem
- Focus on interests not positions (which we have already referred to)

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- Generate creative options

What does it mean to find an 'objective measure'? It means to consider the available options in relation to a recognized authority of some sort. For example, in Australia we drive on the left hand side of the road. If someone decides that she wants to drive on the right hand side, she is clearly in breach of the law and causing potential danger to other road users. Leading on from this, we could say that legality and safety are two accepted objective measures that can be invoked appropriately in certain types of disagreement and dispute.

Of course, what should be considered legal and what can be considered safe can also be disputed. This is a different level of dispute. Life is never static. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus observed many centuries ago, You can't step into the same river twice. The river may be in the same place as yesterday but the water flowing through it yesterday has now moved downstream and fresh currents are moving past.

Disagreement is a part of progress.

Some of the most progressive and productive organisations are those that encourage a culture of active participation in decision making that includes disagreement backed by objective evidence.

This takes us back to our first tip, Focus on common interests. If an organisation and its members has clarity on what are their common interests then they have a very good objective measure to use in addressing disagreements and disputes.

- Is the disagreement likely to lead to a better way to satisfy the common interests of the team or organisation?

Find objective measures of progress.

Tip #6: Say sorry when you've got it wrong

Sorry is the hardest word.

It's often taken as an admission that we got it wrong and nobody likes to be wrong.

It seems to imply that the person saying sorry is taking responsibility for what happened and this may be interpreted as admitting liability for something that was, in fact, beyond the control of any one person. Nobody wants to be blamed for something that wasn't their fault.

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It can be perceived by others as admitting weakness and nobody likes to be perceived in a bad light.

And sometimes saying sorry isn't enough. Expressions of regret and apology need to be backed up with appropriate actions.

Yet, saying sorry can be the first step to defusing a potential conflict. The word acknowledges that the other person's feelings have been hurt and that this was unintentional. We didn't mean to cause them distress.

Feelings are a major part of our experience. They act like a barometer to our soul. When we perceive ourselves to be under stress, our feelings of frustration start to build. Our bodies are hard wired to react to stress with fight, flight or freezing. These responses are seldom, if ever, appropriate in the workplace. So we learn to control them. This is part of what emotional intelligence is about. However, control can come at a price when the feelings are bottled up with no outlet. The words, 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset/distress/hurt you,' can provide the other person with a way to let go feelings of distress. They can take the sting out of a painful situation.

Of course, in many situations we don't see the need for apology because we did what we did in the belief that this was the best thing to do in the circumstances. Instead of apologizing, we go into a lengthy explanation of our actions. Unfortunately, this seldom, if ever, addresses the emotional needs of the person who feels themselves to have been wronged. Lengthy explanations just make things worse.

To prevent further conflict we need to address feelings and the quickest route to this is to say, 'Sorry.'

Some years ago, I read the autobiography of Harold Wilson, one of the UK's Prime Ministers. He had some interesting things to say about political decision making and the chances of making decisions that would turn out for the best. As I remember it, he thought that political decision making was not all that different from any other kind of decision making. It was just more widely visible. He reckoned that even the 'best' decision makers were right only a small fraction of the time. 4 out of 10 would be a 'good' average score for a 'good' decision maker.

If we take a view like that of Harold Wilson, it becomes easier to say sorry. By being prepared to say sorry we create a number of shifts in a situation.

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- We take the pressure off ourselves to always be in the right. We can still be very much aware that we did the best we could under the circumstances that presented but we don't need to feel that we are in complete control of all of these circumstances.
- We put ourselves more squarely in control of what we can control in any situation – our own responses.
- We take a step towards working with the other person to find a solution that meets both parties' needs. Ury and Fishers first principle in *Getting to Yes* is to 'Separate the people from the problem'. One way of doing this is to acknowledge the feelings of the people in the situation and address them. Saying sorry can be a first step.

Say sorry when you've got it wrong.

Tip #7: *Keep the conversation going*

It's very tempting to give up when disagreement starts to spiral downwards into conflict. But if we can hang in and keep talking, then we are making space for a resolution of the situation that will leave everyone feeling better and able to move on.

A helpful injunction is 'Be *curious* not furious'. When we are furious, we automatically shift into a mode of blame that discounts and depreciates the other side. We cut ourselves off from them. When we are curious, on the other hand, we deliberately engage with the other side. We try to find out more about their side of the story, we start to listen and ask more questions. So long as we are talking, we are potentially in a solution-finding mode.

Elias Porter, who developed the Strength Deployment Inventory, also developed the concept of three stages of conflict. As one stage progresses to the next, the conflict deepens and becomes more difficult to address.

Here in my words is how it works.

In the first stage, the parties involved are still talking to each other in more or less equal and respectful terms. They acknowledge each other and their common concern over the problem issue.

The equation is, Problem + my interests + your interests = Solution

In the second stage, they have along the way decided that they are not being listened to by the other party and so there is no point in trying to talk to the other. When the situation is

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perceived in this way, the people or sides involved focus on addressing the issue in their own way. A typical expression of this situation in the workplace is when a person says something like, 'I only work here', or 'I don't even try to talk to x department anymore. I just let them get on with their job and I get on with mine.'

The equation has become, Problem + my interests = Solution. The other side has been dropped from the equation.

Unfortunately, this is not a helpful development. Initially the problem was a shared issue. When it is no longer seen as shared, each side develops their own view and their own solutions. In fact, we now have more problems and more solutions going on in parallel so long as the parties are not willing to find common ground. We have a dysfunctional situation that will only start to improve if the parties can move back to stage 1.

The third stage is even worse. The problems multiply, the stress on the people involved increases, there is no way to release the pressure. Eventually, the problems become too great for the people dealing with them. They drop the ball, as it were. Their focus is now simply on self-preservation. This could mean all out war, or total withdrawal, or outright capitulation to the other person. The response a particular person chooses will reflect their own motivational value system.

The equation has now become, My interests = Solution.


In this situation, people are preoccupied with their own survival as a person. Their self esteem and self worth are threatened to the point where they are unable to focus their full attention on the job. Signs of this may be increased absenteeism and falling productivity.

The only way out is to find means to restart the conversation.

With this last tip, the wheel has come full circle. To resolve disagreement and deal with conflict we must keep the conversation going. This means finding common interests and respecting the other person's feelings; choosing manageable goals, getting everyone on side and appreciating each person's strengths and contribution; together finding and agreeing to objective measures of progress; and saying sorry when you've got it wrong.

Keep the conversation going.

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Justus Lewis offers heart-centred solution oriented coaching to people and organisations who are struggling to find positive outcomes to confusing and difficult situations, who want to avoid unwarranted conflict and to invite more happiness.

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If you have any comments or suggestions for improvement, please contact me. I'd like to hear from you.

Warm regards,

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